

Lessons from NAEYC Accreditation

Avoiding Lapses in Supervision That Place Children at Risk

Lapses in supervision of children can happen in all types of programs, and even a momentary lapse can have disastrous consequences. When a lapse occurs that affects program quality and puts children at risk, it is critical to consider the nature of the incident and its lessons for future risk management.

Between September 2006 and September 2009, NAEYC-Accredited programs for young children reported to the NAEYC Academy 169 incidents involving lapses in staff supervision of children. Most of these incidents were reported as part of the approximately 20,000 annual or other self-reports submitted by programs during this period. (See "New Requirements for Reporting Critical Events.") This article reviews the findings of an analysis of the incidents, providing helpful information that all programs can use to reduce the potential for such occurrences.

Types of incidents that have occurred

There are two broad categories of incidents involving lapses in supervision of children—children left unsupervised by teaching staff and children leaving the facility without staff knowledge. (Note that a child who leaves the group but remains in the facility is considered unsupervised.) Each category is addressed in the following sections.

Children left unsupervised

Between 2006 and 2009, programs reported 134 incidents with children left unsupervised. About one-third of them involved infants or toddlers; the rest involved preschoolers or

kindergartners. The most frequent occurrence of this type (57, or nearly half of all reported) involved children being left on the playground. Others involved children left unsupervised in the classroom (41), bathroom (10), or another part of the facility (13).

New Requirements for Reporting Critical Events

As NAEYC strives to enhance the accountability of its accreditation system for programs for young children, the Association has enacted new requirements regarding when and how programs report critical events that may compromise children's health and safety.

Currently accredited programs and those seeking accreditation are now required to promptly notify the NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation when such an event occurs. They must follow up with a report describing the context of the incident and their response to it, including details of the corrective actions taken to avoid future incidents. The NAEYC Academy uses the information to determine whether a program is maintaining the level of quality associated with NAEYC Accreditation. Depending on the scope and severity of the incident and the program's response, a program may be subject to a verification visit or may lose or be denied accreditation. (For a full explanation of procedures and outcomes, see "NAEYC Required Criteria Policy" at www.naeyc.org/files/academy/file/RequiredCriteriaPolicy.pdf.)

NAEYC-Accredited programs have completed comprehensive self-assessments and received external evaluations determining that their program quality meets NAEYC standards and criteria; nevertheless, it is still possible for situations to occur that place children at risk. NAEYC Accreditation minimizes risks by focusing attention on the components of program quality, requiring programs to submit to external evaluations and make periodic self-reports, and conducting random unannounced site visits. But given the dynamic nature of life in programs, accreditation cannot be considered a fail-safe guarantee.

Six incidents occurred in conjunction with field trips; in 7 instances, children were left in vans—an especially dangerous situation in hot weather.

The following scenarios reflect the circumstances of the incidents reported:

- Children playing outdoors do not hear the teachers announcing that it's time to come in.
- Two children go inside from the playground to use the bathroom. One child's parent, unaware that her son is accompanying another child, picks him up as he leaves the bathroom; the other child returns alone to the playground after the rest of the class has returned to the classroom.
- Teaching staff do a head count on the playground to be sure all children are accounted for, but they do not account for a change in the number of children present that day.
- A child is left sleeping in her car seat by the company contracted to provide transportation for the program.
- One group of children goes to the indoor gross motor area with one teacher; another group goes later with another staff member. A child remains behind unnoticed because each staff member assumes the missing child is with the other group.
- A class goes out to the playground, leaving behind unnoticed a child who fell asleep.

Several of the reported instances include one of two potentially contributing factors:

1. A variation in the normal routine
2. Staff members simply not taking the time to ensure that every child is present before making a transition

These factors underscore the importance of being especially cautious when an unusual circumstance occurs, of taking time to think through the implications of the change for later routines, and of carefully checking that all children are accounted for before making a transition. Frequent head counts with an accurate attendance sheet in hand are useful. Preschool children can assist in recognizing that all friends are gathered when the teacher asks, "Is everyone ready to go inside? Are we all here?"

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Children who leave

The incidents reported involving children leaving the facility unnoticed totaled 35 during the past three years. It is not clear whether this surprisingly high number is a phenomenon of the more stringent reporting requirements or an actual increase in this type of incident. Eight of the reported cases involved toddlers; 27 involved preschoolers or kindergartners. The average time away in cases involving toddlers was three minutes; for preschoolers or kindergartners, children were away for an average of 18 minutes.

Based on the reports, it appears that children who leave a facility often have a specific purpose in mind—going to a nearby store to buy something to eat, going home, or going to see a parent who works nearby. Programs that are part of a larger community, such as a college campus, hospital, or employer work site, may be at particular risk. In these situations, a child's parent may work in a nearby building, and the child may be quite familiar with the route to her parent's workplace. Similarly, a child whose daily routine includes a stop at a nearby convenience store after leaving the program, or a child who walks

daily from his home to the program, may also be familiar with the route and feel overly confident in his ability to navigate the distance alone.

As with children left unsupervised, times of transition seem to be especially risky for children leaving their group without supervision. In several cases, children left unnoticed in the confusion of other families arriving at pickup time or while groups were coming from and going to various parts of the program facility. In other cases, children left during free play when small groups of children were engaged in various activities in different areas of the room. In at least one instance, a child left the classroom through a side door and was able to leave the grounds unnoticed.

Steps for prevention

The steps programs have taken to address the critical incidents that occurred may guide other programs in taking preventive measures. These actions can be grouped into four broad categories: (1) implementing new procedures; (2) training and retraining staff; (3) making structural changes; and (4) engaging children and families.

Procedural changes. Examples include revising or developing new systems to track children (such as requiring staff to carry out periodic attendance checks or instituting the use of photo card systems); revising or developing new systems for better staff communication during any type of transition (for example, using walkie-talkies or cell phones while on the playground); and creating sign-in and departure procedures for families and staff that require formally passing responsibility for the child from the family member to a staff person (or vice-versa for departure). It is important for families to understand how critical it is to follow supervision procedures.

Staff training and retraining. Training sessions can address child supervision procedures, with all staff required to participate periodically. Training can address how staff position themselves in the classroom or

on the playground to ensure that all children are monitored. Regularly observing classroom or program practices and assessing child supervision practices can provide insights for training sessions. Consultants may conduct independent assessments and provide training based on their recommendations for improvement.

Structural changes. Program staff or consultants can examine classrooms and playgrounds to determine if changes in setup or equipment placement would enhance supervision of children. Arrangement can include semiprivate spaces as long as both children and adults can be observed from outside the area. Doors may be equipped with bells or alarms or locked, with codes or key cards required for entry and exit, taking care to also comply with fire laws. Programs may need to hire additional staff and position them in the lobby or common area.

Engaging children and families. Teachers can seek children's cooperation in the safety efforts, for example, by stressing the importance of remaining with the group or by posting colorful STOP signs near outdoor exits, at children's eye level. They can enlist families to support child supervision, for example, by requesting that they follow drop-off and pickup procedures and emphasizing the importance of the school's safety procedures.

By paying close attention to their supervision practices and implementing effective risk-management procedures, early childhood programs can take steps to reduce the risk of harm to children as much as possible—an important goal for us all.

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